



# TALES FOR ALL TIMES

Santha Rungachary





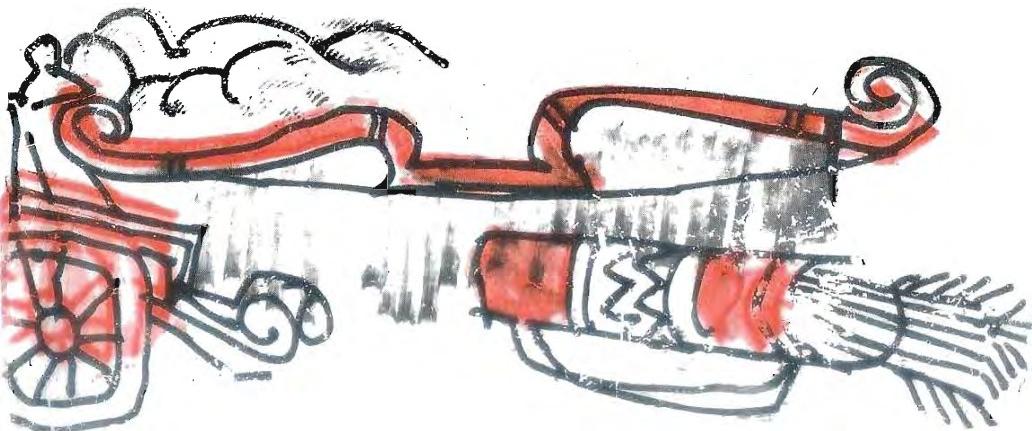
*Nehru Bal Pustakalaya*

# TALES FOR ALL TIMES

**Santha Rungachary**

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## DIALOGUE WITH DEATH

Princess Savitri stood slender, beautiful but resolute before her father. On her face was the look of stubbornness which he knew so well but always felt helpless against.

"You said I could choose my husband myself," she reminded him. "You did say so, don't you remember, Father? And now it seems you want to go back on your word."

Before the King could defend himself, the sage Narada smoothly intervened to prevent a domestic quarrel. "My child," he said, "your father is not going back on his promise. He was only asking me about Satyavan, the man you want to marry. And while I was talking to him he said, 'Let me send for Savitri, I want her to hear what you are saying'."

"And what were you saying?" enquired Savitri.

Savitri knew she had to be very, very careful with Narada. Because, though she was clever, Narada was even cleverer. He was friend, adviser and ambassador to gods and mortals alike. Everything he did was for the eventual good of everyone. But whatever the final outcome, the immediate effect of his actions was often disagreeable. For Narada was cunning as a fox and could trip up the wisest of men. Savitri had learnt to have a healthy respect for him.

"Satyavan whom you love," began Narada, "is a prince of noble descent and a worthy young man. His name means one who speaks nothing but the truth, and he deserves it well. He is intelligent and courageous, and a devoted son to an old blind father who was deposed by a treacherous relative. But though he was born to inherit a throne, he is living in the forest and working as a woodcutter."

"I know all this," said Savitri.

"Perhaps you know a great deal more?" probed Narada.

"That depends on what else you know," countered Savitri.

Narada smiled. "This chit of a girl," he thought, "thinks she can outwit me."

"I know one other fact which you do not know," said the sage. "I was just telling your father about it."

"Is it the fact that Satyavan is a condemned man?" asked Savitri quietly. "That he is fated to die exactly a year from today?"

The courage with which the young girl said these words shook her two listeners.

"And you still want to marry him?" exclaimed her father, his voice trembling.

"How did you discover this?" asked Narada, looking at her thoughtfully. "Did you meet his parents?"

"Yes," replied Savitri. "His mother who is deeply religious told me. The Brahmins who drew up Satyavan's horoscope when he was born had warned her. But Satyavan is ignorant of it, only his parents know. They have kept it a secret all these years and it has weighed heavily on them."

"Tell me, Savitri," said Narada, a note of respect creeping into his voice, "are you sure you realise what is ahead of you if you marry Satyavan?"

"Yes," said Savitri unhesitatingly.

"You are not afraid?"

"Unhappy, yes," replied Savitri gravely, "but afraid, no. You see, I believe that life and death are determined by more than the mere positions of stars and planets calculated by professional Brahmins. Human beings influence one another's lives. If I marry Satyavan my destiny will affect his and who knows what may happen and what can be prevented from happening?"

"Let there be no further objection to this marriage, Aswapati," said Narada rising. "You can arrange for the betrothal of your daughter at once." He smiled as Savitri rose and came to take leave of him. "I am only a *brahma-charji*, little Princess, but my prayers and blessings are with you. May your courage shield and protect Satyavan all his life."

As they watched the slender-waisted Princess leave them, King Aswapati sighed. "She should have been a boy," he said. "She is far too clever and nimble-witted for a woman. Her quick mind is going to be a liability to her."



"We must not be old-fashioned about these things, Aswapati," Narada chided him. "Women need to have a mind of their own as much as men do. In any case, Savitri will undoubtedly find it useful in adapting herself to live in a forest with a woodcutter-husband, a blind father-in-law and a deeply religious mother-in-law."

But Narada's fears were misplaced. Savitri's marriage to Satyavan was so happy that to her the forest seemed more comfortable than a palace. She was certainly freer. She awoke every morning to the sound of birds twittering in the trees and cows calling to their calves. The love that her parents-in-law showered on her made the separation from her own parents easier to bear. She learnt from them the discipline of prayer and penance. She thus grew from a girl into a woman in an atmosphere of wisdom, happiness and freedom.

But though she concealed it well, and so did her parents-in-law, Satyavan's impending doom cast a shadow over their lives.

The day of destiny, when it finally dawned, was just like any other day. Birds twittered in the trees and cows called to their young. Satyavan's father and mother, their faces full of despair, went about their chores. From time to time they bent their eyes on their only son with such longing that Savitri, unable to look, turned her own away. Savitri herself went about her tasks in a complete daze.

As Satyavan got ready to go to the forest to cut wood, Savitri also rose.

"I am coming with you today, if I may," she said.

"Why, Savitri?" asked Satyavan. "The sun is hot these days. And you have the habit of wandering off and getting lost."

"Today I shall sit and watch you," said Savitri attempting a convincing smile.

"Let her go with you, my son," said Satyavan's mother suddenly.

"Are you trying to get rid of your daughter-in-law for the morning, Mother?" asked Satyavan with a twinkle in his eye.

"I am trying to teach my son to pamper his young wife," retorted his mother. "It is not as if the poor girl has much fun here."



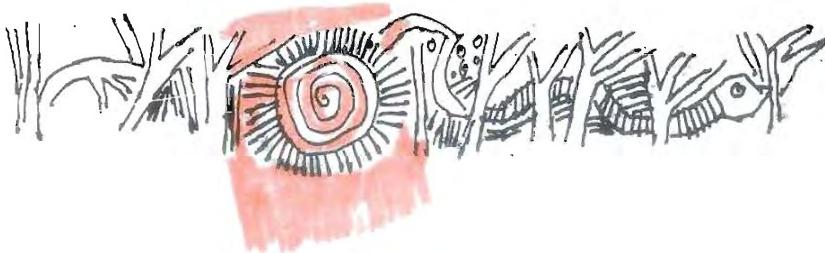
"Pamper her, must I?" teased Satyavan. "A trip to the forest is a poor substitute for a diamond-and-ruby necklace which I would like to give her."

"A diamond-and-ruby necklace?" asked Savitri smiling brilliantly while her heart slowly broke inside her. "I will settle for the trip to the forest today, but the diamond-and-ruby necklace is a promise, remember. I shall claim it one day."

Laughing and promising extravagant gifts to each other like irresponsible children, Savitri and Satyavan set off for the forest. When Satyavan took leave of his parents, their hands and eyes lingered on him a trifle longer than usual, but Savitri pretended not to notice, lest the tears close to her eyes overflow and attract attention. "I need all my courage and discipline today," she kept reminding herself, "and the prayers and blessings of friends and Brahmins, and of Narada. It is now up to me."

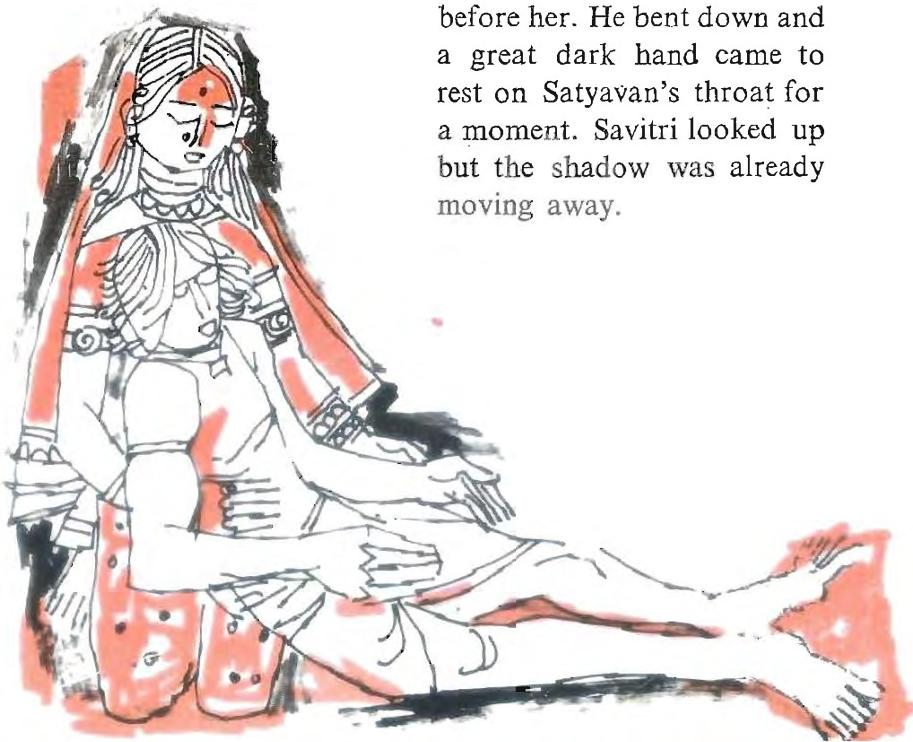
When they were deep in the forest, Satyavan carefully selected the tree he was going to cut and began to hack at the sturdy trunk. Savitri sat close by watching out for snakes and wild animals through whom she expected death to strike her beloved husband. But nothing so dramatic occurred. A tiger did not sneak up from behind the long grass or a cobra strike from the undergrowth! One moment Satyavan was swinging his axe, and the next he was holding his head and stumbling towards his wife. "Such a terrible pain in my head," he mumbled and fell on the ground unconscious.

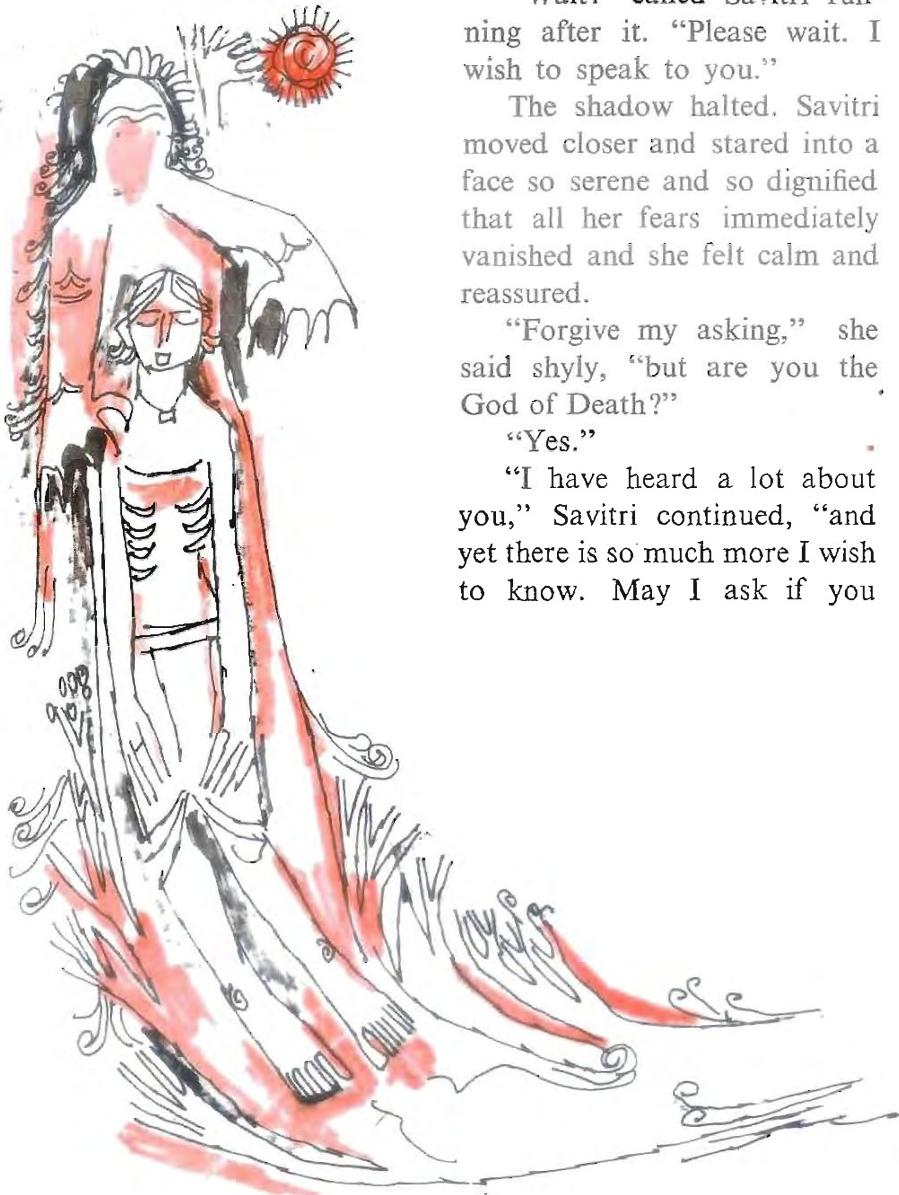
Savitri put his head on her lap and looked around for help. Not a soul was in sight. Stunned by Satyavan's



collapse, Savitri sat as if turned to stone.

Then, suddenly, obscuring the sun, a shadow fell across her face. A dark stranger, a dark shadow rather, stood before her. He bent down and a great dark hand came to rest on Satyavan's throat for a moment. Savitri looked up but the shadow was already moving away.





"Wait!" called Savitri running after it. "Please wait. I wish to speak to you."

The shadow halted. Savitri moved closer and stared into a face so serene and so dignified that all her fears immediately vanished and she felt calm and reassured.

"Forgive my asking," she said shyly, "but are you the God of Death?"

"Yes."

"I have heard a lot about you," Savitri continued, "and yet there is so much more I wish to know. May I ask if you

personally come to collect every life?"

"No, I come only for special people," replied Death, walking on.

"If Satyavan was so special," said Savitri quietly, "why collect his life when he was so young and guiltless of any wrong?"

"Death is not a punishment."

Savitri quickened her footsteps to keep up with the dark stranger. "If it is not a punishment," she persisted, "who decides when a life is to end? It seems unjust to decide it at birth, and illogical too."

"It is not easy to understand." The shadow stopped. "Why don't you go back, Savitri? Why are you following me?"

"I am not following *you*," said Savitri. "I am following my husband."

"He is no longer your husband."



"I believe that love extends beyond life," Savitri said softly. "We say that when a man and a woman fall in love it is a recognition. You only *recognise* a person you have known before. I recognised Satyavan the first time I met him. So we must have known each other before. When could this have been except in some unknown time before my birth or his? That is why I cannot leave him now. We have been too long together. If you take him, you must take me too."

Yama, the God of Death, laughed softly. "You are extremely stubborn. Your logic amuses me. Is there anything you wish for—except, of course, the life of Satyavan? I would like to grant it to you."

Savitri thought over the suggestion.

"Well," she said at last, "you know that Satyavan's father was overthrown by treachery. I think that wrong should be righted. I hope you agree with me."

"Agreed," said Yama at once and strode away briskly. But when he looked back some time later, there was Savitri right behind him, her feet cut and bleeding from the thorns and stones along the path.

"You walk too fast for me," she said smiling brightly.

"What exactly do you want, Savitri?" asked Yama staring at her. "If it is Satyavan's life, you may as well give up at once because that is out of the question. Yama never goes back on his word nor returns a life."

"Oh, is that so?" asked Savitri nodding her head thoughtfully. "How interesting! But then you must be very certain that what you are doing is right, mustn't you?"

"Right and wrong have nothing to do with it."

"Really!" exclaimed Savitri. "How extraordinary! It has been dinned into my head from childhood that I must always take care to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. Perhaps that applies only to mortals and not to gods."

"But death is different."

"How so? It appears to me right that what applies to life should apply equally to death."

"You have a way of twisting everything and making it seem logical."

"I beg your forgiveness," said Savitri humbly. "Let me put it another way. If throughout life we take care to do what is right, it seems only fair..."

"Stop!" said Yama. "If I grant you another wish, will you stop following me?"

"Oh, are you going to grant me another wish?" exclaimed Savitri clapping her hands with delight. "How very kind and generous."

"Remember you are not to ask for Satyavan's life."

"Of course," said Savitri casually. "Now, let me see. There was something I wanted to ask for as part of my first wish." She paused, then her brow cleared. "Oh yes, it was about my father-in-law whom you were kind enough to reinstate. He is blind. Of what use is a kingdom to a blind man? And what use is a blind man to a kingdom?"

"Your father-in-law's sight will be fully restored," said Yama with a smile.

But before he could walk away, Savitri spoke again. "I am so glad that I remembered my father-in-law's handicap," the tenacious young woman said smiling in response,

"because if I had not, do you know what I might have requested?"

"What?"

"Prosperity and happiness for my father's and my father-in-law's kingdoms," she replied. "I am the only one left to succeed to both the kingdoms. But I am glad I did not ask you to grant that wish because on second thoughts, why should I? Why should prosperity and happiness be given to these kingdoms? It is the duty of the kings to work to make their people happy and prosperous, don't you agree?"

"Yes."

"Kingship is a great responsibility," said Savitri solemnly shaking her head. "It does not merely consist in living in a palace, holding court, patronising poets and musicians, and sending out tax-collectors. The King has to ensure that the law is administered justly and see that his officials do not harass the people. He has to maintain peace with his neighbours and see that no one in his kingdom is without food, clothing or shelter. Above all, the King must take care to see that his people have the right of free speech and frank criticism. Why? So that he does not become a despot."

"You are absolutely right," said Yama filled with admiration for her worthy views. "Traditions of justice and freedom are even better than statute-book laws."

"And for this you require," stated Savitri, "an unbroken chain of royal dynasties. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, indeed," said Yama. "Uncertain succession leads to confusion, chaos and wars among kinsmen."

Savitri suddenly lapsed into silence. A look of utter despair descended on her face, her shoulders drooped and a tear fell from time to time from her beautiful eyes.

"What is the matter?" asked Yama surprised.

"You are so wise and all-knowing," said Savitri with a sigh, "I am sure you can guess what I am thinking."

Yama frowned. Trying to guess her thoughts would be like betting on the direction the wind would blow on a stormy day.

"I was thinking," said Savitri in a low voice, "here are two kingdoms which will have no ruler after me. What will happen to my father's and my father-in-law's dynasties? What confusion, chaos and wars among kinsmen—those were your exact words, were they not—will follow my death? Blood may flow in the streets, cities lie desolate, the harvest remain uncut and the wails of women and children rise from every home..."

"Stop!" shouted Yama. "Such things will not be permitted to happen. I grant you a hundred sons to ensure the continuity of your royal line."

As soon as he uttered these words, a remarkable change came over Savitri. Her face was transfigured with joy, the drooping shoulders straightened, the sighing and the tears ceased as if by magic, and the girl, beautiful and imperious, stood before Yama, every inch a princess.

"I am greatly distressed," she said formally, "to be the cause of your breaking one of your traditions."

"Which tradition?" asked the God of Death warily.

"That Yama never returns a life," said Savitri. "You have just blessed me with a hundred sons. How can I have



them if you take away my husband's life?"

Yama took his defeat well. In fact, as they walked swiftly back to the forest, he confessed. "I should have guessed that Narada was up to something," he said, "when he suggested that I should go myself and collect Satyavan's life."

Needless to say, every wish that the God of Death had granted Savitri was fulfilled. Satyavan rose as if from sleep, refreshed and eager to tell Savitri of the strange dream that





he had had of a long journey with a dark stranger. Satyavan's father regained both his eyesight and his kingdom. Savitri got her diamond-and-ruby necklace though, of course, Yama was not responsible for that gift.

One day, when all the excitement of the changes in their fortunes had abated somewhat, Savitri's father, King Aswapati, took her aside and asked, "What I cannot understand is how you had the courage to cross swords with the God of Death."

Savitri smiled gently and said, "When I first met Satyavan's mother and she told me of the horoscope drawn up by the Brahmins at her son's birth, she added that there was one Brahmin, wiser and more far-seeing than the rest, who had added a footnote to the prediction. He had said that Satyavan's death could be averted by something which was stronger than death. That is what gave me hope and courage. I had something stronger than death—love."



## THE SEVEN-DAY VIGIL

Parikshit, the King of Hastinapura, was a great hunter. He loved hunting not only for its excitement and thrill but also as a means to keep forests free of wild animals so that people living there could be safe and happy.

One day, while out hunting, the King found that he had wounded a deer but not gravely enough to kill it. As you know, the rule of the hunt is to kill, never to maim. To leave an animal wounded and in pain was, and is, considered inhuman and wrong. So the King, wanting to kill the deer and put it out of its agony, followed the animal deeper and deeper into the forest. Soon he got separated from his men. He was tired, hungry and thirsty but was still determined not to turn back till the deer had been relieved of its pain by death.

Suddenly the King came to a clearing among the trees



where an old man was busy feeding his cows. The King went up to him and said: "My friend, I am the son of Abhimanyu and the ruler of this kingdom. I am looking for a wounded deer. Did it come this way? Have you seen it?"

It so happened that the old man, who was a venerable ascetic named Samika, was observing a vow of silence that day. So he did not reply to the King's question. At first the King was surprised at the ascetic's silence. Then he thought, "Perhaps the old man is hard of hearing," and shouted his questions. Samika continued to look at the King without answering. But the old ascetic was not deaf, as the King soon discovered, because just then one of the cows kicked the milking-pail and at the sound the man turned swiftly and prevented it from toppling over.

The King became very angry. "The forest-dwellers are growing insolent," he thought. "But I will give Samika one more chance to redeem himself." So, King Parikshit raised his voice and, looking straight at Samika, told him clearly that if he did not answer at once and with proper respect, he, the King, would not be answerable for his actions. Samika shook his head, an answer which the King construed as a refusal to reply. He could not correctly interpret the anxious helpless look in the old ascetic's eyes.

In a fit of childish pique, the King looked around him, wondering how he could humiliate the arrogant God-

seeker. His eye fell upon a dead snake lying near by. Out flashed the royal sword, its sharp tip picking up the dead snake in one smooth movement. The next moment the snake flew into the air and landed around the neck of old Samika. The King laughed with satisfaction, expecting the hermit to fly into a rage, perhaps even to curse him.

But Samika did neither. He merely looked at the King with great compassion. Ashamed, the King turned away and left the clearing.

There had been a witness to this scene of whom neither the King nor Samika was aware. This was Krisha, a friend of Samika's son, Sringin. After the King's hurried departure, Krisha carried the news to Sringin.



"The other day you said," he began when he finally found Sringin, "that we dwellers of the forest owe allegiance first to God and then to the King, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Sringin absent-mindedly, concentrating on his work of collecting rare herbs.

"Would you say we owe allegiance to the King even when he does not care for us and in fact insults us?" Krisha then asked.

"The King—I presume you are speaking of King Parikshit—would never insult the forest-dwellers. Why should he?"

"Suppose," said Krisha cunningly, for he was a bit of a mischief-maker, "I told you I myself saw the King insult one of us?"

"I would not believe you," replied Sringin promptly.

"Suppose you saw the evidence with your own eyes?"

"Evidence?" said Sringin, losing patience with his friend. "Why do you speak in riddles? Speak plainly and then perhaps I will understand the tale you want to tell."

"It is not a tale, come and see for yourself," said Krisha, leading Sringin to the clearing where old Samika sat in meditation, the dead snake still around his neck.

"There is a snake around my father's neck," said Sringin rushing forward. But his friend pulled him back.

"It is only a dead snake," he said. "The King, our sovereign and gracious protector, to whom, according to





you, we owe allegiance second only to God, put it round your father's neck scarce an hour ago. And what do you suppose is your father's crime to merit this punishment? Your father would not answer his questions about a wounded deer. I heard him shout at your old father and then pick up the dead snake with his sword—quite an adroit way His Majesty has with a sword. And then he aimed the reptile at your father's head. It coiled like a garland neatly round your father's neck. I saw it myself, with my own eyes."

"But," cried Sringin, "why did you not step forward and tell the King that today was my father's day of silence?"

"What!" exclaimed Krisha. "With the King holding an unsheathed sword in his hand and his face blazing with fury? I would probably have got the sword through my neck!"

Sringin gazed at his old father with love and pride. The dead snake offended him. "The King did wrong to insult my father," he said thinking aloud. "Could he not see the nobility on his face? Could he not see the serenity in his eyes?"

"Kings may look but they do not see," said Krisha, expressing in a nutshell his prejudice against monarchy.

The sight of his father bearing the evidence of the King's affront on his person made Sringin angrier and angrier. At last he could bear it no longer and his anger burst forth in the form of a curse.



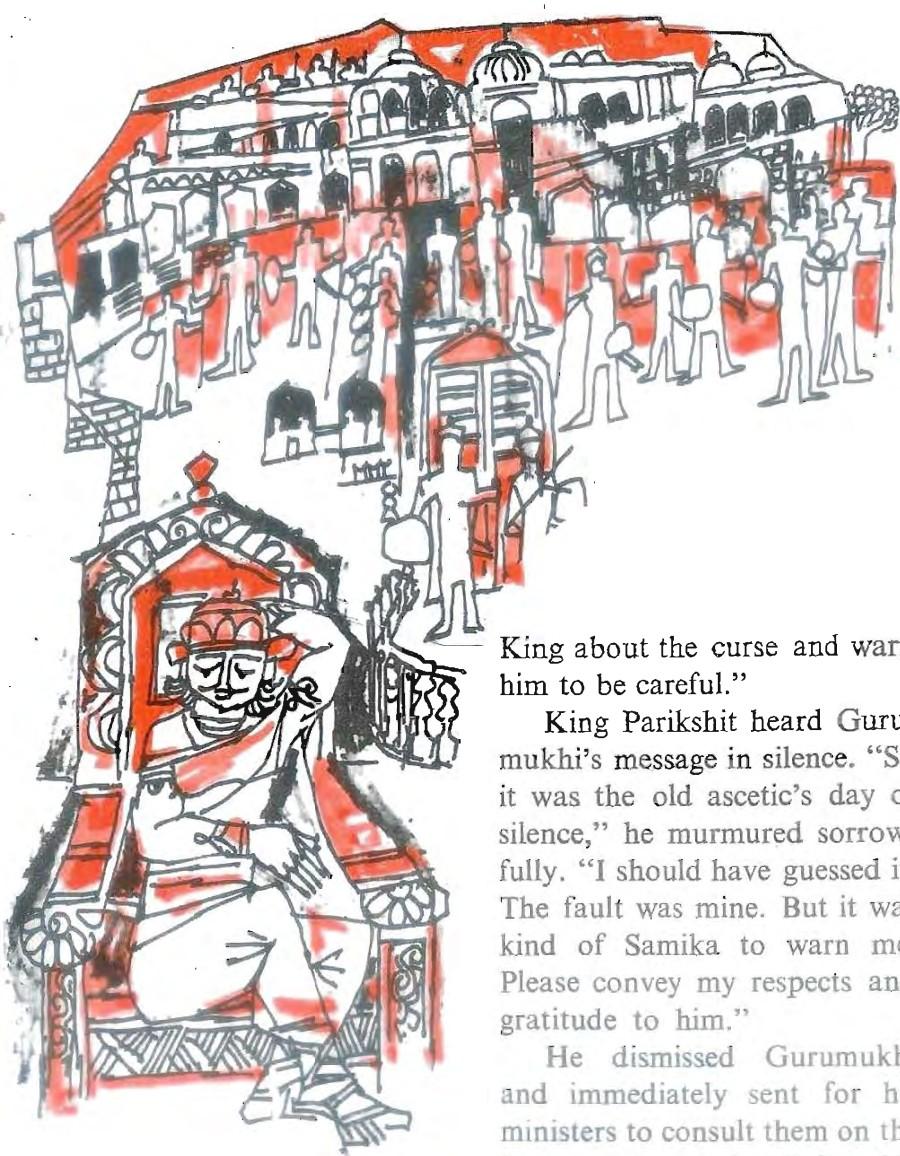
"King he may be, but how dare he place a dead snake on the shoulders of my noble father. He has insulted not only my father but also all the dwellers of the forest who have never done him any harm. I curse him! This King who has tarnished the fair name of the royal line of Hastinapura may be taken within seven nights to the land of the dead by Takshaka, the King of serpents!"

When he heard this dreadful curse, Sringin's father stirred from his meditation and gazed with fear and horror at his son's face. He was so stricken by what his son had done that he broke his vow of silence and wailed: "Sringin, my son, what have you done? You have cursed good King Parikshit who has always taken care of us and who made it possible for us to dwell in peace in this forest. Who drove you to this madness? Is this how ascetics behave? Heaven knows what confusion and chaos will follow the expression of your anger. By cursing Parikshit you have doomed not only a king but a whole kingdom. This would have been wrong under any circumstances; it is especially wrong in the case of Parikshit and of Hastinapura who do not deserve this punishment!"

Sringin hung his head in shame.

"Alas, you cannot even withdraw the curse," mourned his father. "You have the power of having everything you say come true. That is why I warned you repeatedly to keep your temper in check and think a hundred times before you spoke!"

For a time Samika sat lost in thought and then he rose briskly. "Send Gurumukhi to me at once," he said. "I have to send him to the palace immediately to tell the



King about the curse and warn him to be careful."

King Parikshit heard Gurumukhi's message in silence. "So it was the old ascetic's day of silence," he murmured sorrowfully. "I should have guessed it. The fault was mine. But it was kind of Samika to warn me. Please convey my respects and gratitude to him."

He dismissed Gurumukhi and immediately sent for his ministers to consult them on the best course to take. Before his ministers arrived, the King despatched a message to Kashyap,

the Brahmin who had the power to cure people of the most deadly snake-bite, summoning him to the palace at once.

Following the cabinet decision, architects, builders and masons were rushed to the palace and almost overnight a peculiar structure emerged in the palace grounds : a large single room perched on top of a solitary tall column. In this room the King took up residence. Armed guards stood at the base of the column and outside the door to see that not even an earthworm came anywhere near the King. No one was permitted to enter except the King's family and his ministers.

As Kashyap was hurrying to answer the King's summons, he saw an old man sitting dejectedly by the wayside.

"What ails you, my friend," asked Kashyap, "that you are so gloomy?"

"The injustice of life," said the old man sighing. "You are going to the palace. All the doors are open for you. I too wish to go to the palace. But not one door will open for me."



"You wish to see the King?"

"Yes."

"I have been summoned to cure the King of Takshaka's bite with which he is threatened. What would your business with him be?"

"To kill him," answered the old man and immediately assumed his real form, that of Takshaka, the King of serpents.

"This is an awkward situation," said Kashyap after they had greeted each other. "You are going to kill the King; I am going to revive him. Do we go together or separately?"

"Are you sure," asked Takshaka, "that you can save the King from my poison?"

"Yes," replied Kashyap without hesitation.

"Prove it to me," challenged Takshaka. "I shall bite this sapling. It will immediately die. Let us see if you can revive it."

And the serpent-King pulled out his forked tongue and injected venom deep into the stem of the plant. Within minutes, the plant was reduced to ashes.

"Now, it is your turn," Takshaka said to Kashyap.

Kashyap picked up a handful of the ashes and closed his eyes in prayer. Then he buried the ashes at the spot where he had picked them up. Within minutes, a green sprout appeared, then two tender leaves and finally a thin stem which grew straight and tall right before their eyes, sprouting fresh leaves till soon the plant stood as before at the spot.

Takshaka watched this performance first with astonish-

ment and then with resignation. This kind of thing was not new to him. He was constantly coming across sages and ascetics in the forest who performed strange deeds and wrought curious miracles.

"I accept your victory in this instance," he said to Kashyap. "But you mustn't use your power against me in the case of King Parikshit."

"Why?" asked Kashyap quietly.

"Let me ask you a question first," said the serpent. "Would you consider it right to interfere with the working of fate?"

"No," replied Kashyap at once. "But in the case of King Parikshit, it is a curse which will interfere with the working of fate."

"You are wrong," said Takshaka quietly. "I have not been sent to bring an untimely death to the monarch but



only to fulfil his destiny. I have come from the God of Death, despatched according to his time-chart. Sringin, Samika's son, did not utter a curse but a prophecy."

Kashyap stood lost in thought. "Is King Parikshit fated to die within seven days?" he asked at last. "Would he die even if Sringin had not cursed him?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I shall not interfere then," said Kashyap and he returned to his hermitage.

Takshaka spent a long time planning an entry into the King's chamber. It was only on the seventh day after Sringin's prophecy that a scheme occurred to him. He hastily sent for a few select subjects and gave them instructions.

"The King is too well protected," he warned. "We can only achieve our aim by a clever trick."

In the meantime, King Parikshit, his family and ministers were congratulating themselves on having successfully passed six of the seven days of the curse. The seventh day was now drawing to a close. The curse would end at sunset and that was only a few hours hence. The King wondered why Kashyap had not come but, thanks to intense precautions, so far there had been no need for his services.

Late that evening a group of monks appeared at the base of the column. "We have come from far," they told the guards, "bringing fruit and flowers for the King."

The guards carefully examined the monk [garments and then the baskets of fruits and when they were satisfied, they let them into the King's chamber. "The curse is all

but over," they thought to themselves, "and there seems little harm in permitting these monks to bless the monarch." The saffron-robed monks delivered the fruits to the King and quietly left the palace. As they reached the forest, they reassumed their serpent shape and disappeared into the green undergrowth.

As the hour of sunset drew near, there was jubilation in the King's apartment. The curse would end in minutes and the King would have succeeded in averting his doom.

"The sun is setting," said the King calling his family and ministers. "Come and share these delicious fruits brought by the kind monks."

They all gathered round the table, each reaching for the fruit of his choice. The King's hand closed on a luscious mango. He bit into it. It was delicious. As he bit deeper, he noticed a small worm close to the seed. This was not unusual; good mangoes often have a worm close to the seed. So the King laughed and turned to look out of the window at the setting sun..

"There is no time now for Takshaka to come," he said. Then he addressed the little black worm, "Little worm, do you know the reason your King has failed in his mission? But how can you know? Only Takshaka can answer the question!"

King Parikshit had barely uttered these words when right before his horrified eyes, the little worm grew and grew till it became a splendid cobra. As the rim of the sun dipped below the western horizon, Takshaka raised his mighty, magnificent hood, his forked tongue flashed like lightning and struck King Parikshit.





## UPAMANYU LEARNS A LESSON

Long, long ago there was a teacher named Ayodha Dhaumya (better known as Dhaumya for short) who ran a hermitage school. A number of pupils studied under him. One of them was Upamanyu. Upamanyu and the other students lived with their teacher in the hermitage which stood on the outskirts of a village.

The hermitage school had strict rules of discipline. One of the strictest was the rule about obedience. The teacher's orders and instructions had to be obeyed without question. A second rule concerned the sharing of all food. The village homes supplied the school with cooked food which the boys brought to the hermitage and gave to the teacher who divided it among all of them, including himself.

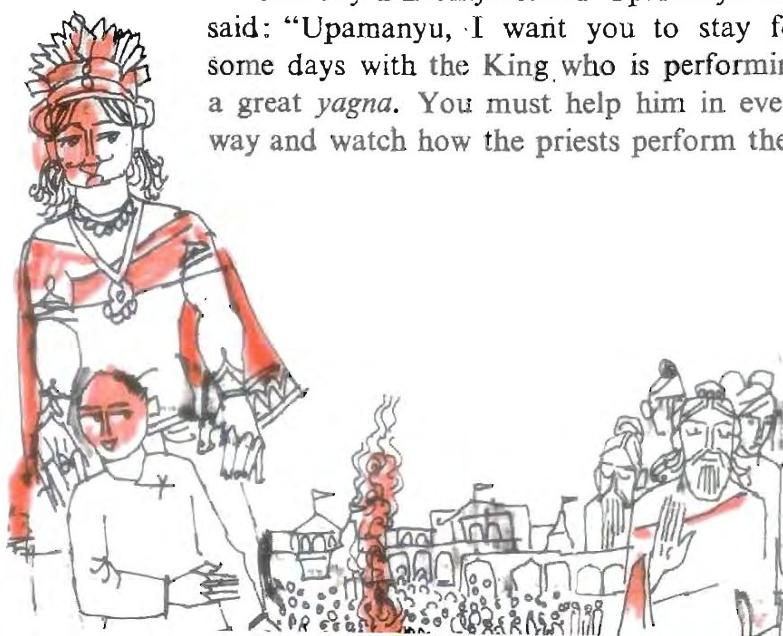
The school, however, grew its own fruit and maintained a dairy.



The boys were taught two subjects, religion and the art of war. Those who wanted to be priests, learnt the scriptures, the Vedas, and how to perform religious ceremonies such as marriages, funerals, and *yagnas*, while those who wanted to be soldiers learnt the use of weapons and the rules of warfare.

The hermitage teacher was more than an instructor; he was also father and mother to his pupils. They were all young boys left in his care by their parents, and he felt responsible for them. He looked after their minds as well as their bodies. He kept a watch on their habits, guided their thoughts and moulded their character. He imposed discipline. He tended the boys when they were sick and punished them when they did wrong. No one, not even kings who sent their sons to hermitage schools, could question the word of the teacher.

One day Dhaumya called Upamanyu and said: "Upamanyu, I want you to stay for some days with the King who is performing a great *yagna*. You must help him in every way and watch how the priests perform their



duties." So Upamanyu set off in high spirits to become the King's personal attendant. He was cheerful and hard-working and everybody was pleased with him. When Upamanyu returned to the hermitage some days later, Dhaumya sent for him.

"Upamanyu," he said, "have you been fasting all these days?"

"No, sir," replied Upamanyu with surprise.

"I thought not," said Dhaumya. "You look very plump. I hope you did not gorge yourself with all the palace delicacies."

"No, sir," answered the boy. "As usual I got my food from the village every day. It is only a three-mile walk from the palace."

"But I do not remember seeing you bring the food to the hermitage," said Dhaumya.

Upamanyu suddenly remembered that he should have surrendered all the food to his teacher. He hit his forehead with the palm of his hand, confessed that he had forgotten the rule and begged his teacher's forgiveness.

That day Upamanyu brought all the food which was



given to him straight to his teacher. Dhaumya, wanting to test Upamanyu's self-control, took it all and, with a nod, dismissed him. Upamanyu waited all day but nobody gave him food. He went to bed hungry.

Two days later Dhaumya sent for his pupil. He expected to find Upamanyu looking weak and hollow-eyed. But to his surprise, Upamanyu came bounding in, cheerful and energetic as ever.

"Upamanyu," said Dhaumya, greatly puzzled, "for two whole days I have taken all the food you brought and left you nothing to eat. I expected to see you faint with hunger. But here you are active and full of bounce. How do you manage?"

"Sir," said the boy, "I go to the village a second time to ask for food."

Dhaumya's face flushed with displeasure. "Have I not told you repeatedly that food is to be collected only once a day from the village? Answer me," he said sternly.

"Yes," said Upamanyu in a small voice. "I was hungry and I forgot the rule."

"This is not the only school that the village is supporting," continued Dhaumya. "Instead of being grateful you have been greedy. You have done wrong. Now go and tend the cattle and think about what I have said."

Upamanyu's punishment continued. He brought food from the village and gave it to Dhaumya. That was the last he saw of it. Three days passed. Dhaumya waited for his pupil to come and ask for food. But not only did Upamanyu not come, he even seemed to work with the same vigour. The teacher sent for his pupil again.



"Did you find it difficult to drive the cattle to the forest today?" he asked the boy.

"No, sir," replied Upamanyu cheerfully.

"I asked," said the teacher patiently, "because you have gone without food for three whole days. Didn't hunger make your legs tremble and your head reel?"

"But I was not hungry," said Upamanyu.

"What!" exclaimed his teacher. "Have you conquered hunger already?"

Upamanyu began to feel nervous. He knew he had again done wrong. "Sir," he said slowly, "I drank the milk of the cows I tended."

There was a long silence. The boy felt miserable, the teacher sad and angry.

"Upamanyu," quietly said Dhaumya at last, "I have noticed that you never tell a lie. You are tidy and good at your studies. You are cheerful and you keep others cheerful. But you have one weakness which, if overlooked when you are young, may affect your entire life. You are at the mercy of your stomach; so much so that you forget rules. You have no control over your actions when you are hungry. I have often told you that a man who is not able to make his body obey his mind will stoop to anything. He will tell lies because he wants to see a fair; he will steal because he is hungry;

he will cheat because he wants to wear fine clothes. Is it to learn these things that your father entrusted you to me, Upamanyu?"

His teacher's sorrowful manner and gentle tone made Upamanyu feel more ashamed than he would have felt if he had been scolded or beaten. He resolved that Dhaumya would never again have cause to find fault with him.

"Sir," he said, red in the face and unable to look the teacher in the eye, "I will not eat another morsel till you yourself ask me to."

Upamanyu did not eat anything that day nor the next. On the third day, as he tended the cattle in the forest, he became so desperately hungry that he seized the juicy leaves of a plant and ate them. But unfortunately, the plant was one from which medicines were prepared. The strong-smelling leaves made Upamanyu's eyes smart and soon the poor boy could not see at all. He was going blind! Frightened out of his wits, he stumbled along, hoping to reach the hermitage before darkness fell. But he could not see the path and soon lost his way. He fell into a deep pit where he lay weeping, terror-stricken and lonely. Night descended swiftly on the forest.

When it was dark Dhaumya noticed Upamanyu's absence and asked the others about him.

"He went to the forest as usual to graze the cattle. The cattle have come home but he has not yet returned," said one of the pupils.



"It is getting dark," said the teacher, hastily rising to his feet. "Let us go and look for him."

So the master and pupils set off to look for Upamanyu. They searched for him in all the usual places but could not find him. Ultimately, the teacher took the boys down an unfamiliar path and called loudly, "Oh Upamanyu! Where are you? Can you hear me?"

Upamanyu had fallen into a light doze from sheer exhaustion. He woke with a start when he heard his teacher's voice. "Sir, I am here," he shouted. "I am in this pit."

At last the hermitage party found him. Upamanyu's clothes were torn, his body was scratched by thorns, and tears still glistened on his cheeks.

"Why are you sitting in that pit, Upamanyu?" asked Dhaumya, looking down at his pupil.

"Sir," said Upamanyu trying hard to control his misery



and indignation, "I am not sitting in this pit out of choice. I *fell* into it. I ate the leaves of a plant which made my eyes water and then blur. I think I have become blind." He paused, then asked, "Are the cattle safe?"

Upamanyu's friends assured him that the cattle had returned to the hermitage safely. Dhaumya asked him to describe the plant whose leaves he had eaten and then said, "I suggest that you remain here and pray to God to restore your eyesight. If your prayers are sincere, God will help you. And when you regain your sight or find the courage to live with your handicap, come back to the hermitage."

Upamanyu immediately realised that he was being put to the test. The young boy's pride refused to permit him to cry or beg for mercy. He accepted his teacher's ruling with bowed head, and folding his arms against his chest, sat down in the correct position for prayer. Dhaumya



called his pupils and returned to the hermitage.

The forest was dark and full of strange noises. But Upamanyu was no longer frightened. He was determined to prove that he could take his punishment like a man. At first he prayed aloud: "Oh gods of the heavens, help me and restore my eyesight. You are kind, just and patient. Forgive me my foolishness. Tonight I have learnt a lesson which I will never forget."

Soon Upamanyu was completely absorbed in prayer. After a time it seemed to him that the twin stars, the Aswins, which his teacher had told him were the physicians of the gods, were twinkling before him in all their glory.

"You called us, Upamanyu?" they asked. "What do you want?"

Upamanyu begged them to restore his sight. The Aswins smiled and gave him a medicinal cake to eat. Upamanyu took it and was about to put it into his mouth, when he suddenly remembered his vow not to eat anything till his teacher himself asked him to do so. His hand closed over the cake.

"I accept your gift and thank you with all my heart," he said.

"Why are you not eating it then?" asked the Aswins.

"Because I promised my teacher that I would not eat without his permission," replied the boy.

"But can't your promise be broken when you are ill?" asked the Aswins, looking at him intently.

"Not unless my teacher permits me to do so," replied Upamanyu firmly.

At his words the Aswins looked at each other, then



smiled at Upamanyu and raised their hands in blessing. Then they soared into the sky and became stars again.

The early morning birds were chirping in the trees when Upamanyu opened his eyes. And lo and behold, he was no longer blind! It was so marvellous to be able to see again that Upamanyu lay for a time just looking around him. He had never realised how beautiful the white fleecy clouds looked against a blue sky. He had never stopped to look at flowers before. Now he watched little buds blossom as the sunlight came down in dazzling shafts through the leaves of the tall trees. Had he ever noticed how many shades of green there were in a single tree? Upamanyu could have lain there for hours and hours happily gazing at the wonders of nature that he had never observed before.

But it was time to return to the hermitage. He sat up and found that his hand was clasping something. "It must be the cake the Aswins gave me," thought Upamanyu.

Carefully, without opening his hand lest the precious cake fall, he scrambled out of the pit and ran all the way back to the hermitage. He felt strong and full of joy and not in the least tired, frightened or even hungry. On arriving at the hermitage, he went straight to his teacher.



"I have returned," said Upamanyu, "with my sight restored by the divine Aswins. They gave me something to eat." Then he looked straight at his teacher. "But I did not eat it. Here it is still clasped in my hand."

He opened his hand and found that he had been holding a fistful of forest mud.

"Was it a dream?" Upamanyu asked his teacher, mystified.

"Not to you," said Dhaumya. "To you it was real, as real as your restored eyesight." A twinkle appeared in the teacher's eyes, "I hope your hunger is also restored, Upamanyu." Before his pupil could reply, he added, "None of us ate last night; few of us slept. So come and we can all have some delicious cold rice and curds!"

## BHIMA SLAYS THE DEMON

Bhima was one of the five famous Pandava brothers who fought against their one hundred cousins for the kingdom which was theirs by right of inheritance. But before the battle of Kurukshetra which made the eldest of the five Pandava brothers King of Hastinapura, the Kauravas tried various devious means to do away with their cousins.

Once escaping from one of these attacks the five brothers and their mother came to Ekachakra, a peaceful village. Tired of wandering, and wanting to live in peace in one place for some time, they decided to make their home here till they were discovered by their cousins. While looking for accommodation they met a kind villager who offered to put them up in his large homestead. They gratefully accepted the offer.

One day Bhima and his mother Kunti were sitting and



talking when they heard the sound of weeping. Kunti rose swiftly to enquire the reason for this distress. As she neared her host's room she heard voices.

"It is too late to go anywhere," the father was saying. "We are all destined to die here for we cannot abandon any member of the family. I had told you repeatedly that we should migrate to some other place. But you would not agree. 'Here I was born,' you said, 'and here I wish to die.' Now your wish is going to be fulfilled in fourfold measure. Not only you but all four of us will die here."

Puzzled and alarmed by these words, Kunti stood rooted to the spot when the wife's voice reached her ears.

"If it should happen that we and our children all die together, what else could we wish for? But alas, only one of us is to die. I have thought about this deeply. It is inconceivable that these young children should be sacrificed. That only leaves you and me. How could I cope with two young children if death should take you away? How would I support myself? What work could I do to earn an honest living? How would I arrange our young daughter's marriage alone or bring up our infant son? Therefore, I should be the one chosen to go so that you can do your duty by the children. It would also be a just punishment for me as I selfishly insisted on staying here against your wishes. So let us cease arguing."

Kunti now understood that there was some dreadful threat hanging over the heads of the kind villager's family. She stepped forward to find out if she could help when she was stopped in mid-stride by the voice of the young girl staunchly volunteering to sacrifice herself so that her

parents could take care of her young brother.

Hesitating no longer, Kunti went swiftly into the room.

"Forgive this intrusion," she said, as the family turned to look at her with surprise, "but I could not help overhearing you. I wish to know the cause of your grief so that I may help if possible. Surely we can jointly resist this evil which you seem to fear."

"Your words are kind and your offer is generous," said the man sorrowfully. "But no human being can assist us. Only the gods can help."

"Tell me the whole story," said Kunti.

"The King of this country is a weak man, ignorant of the art of government and a dullard to boot. Being lazy, he has appointed a number of chieftains to govern his territories in his name. The Governor of this village and the surrounding area is a demon named Vaka. He is a cannibal, large as a mountain, with wild hair and fiery red eyes. When he walks, the earth trembles. When he roars, the



birds in the sky scatter and fly away. Our safety depends on being able to supply him every day with a cart-load of rice, two buffaloes and a human being to eat. So we decided that every family should take its turn to feed the demon. Tomorrow it is our turn. There are four of us. We are trying to make up our minds which one of us is to be sacrificed."

Kunti was speechless with horror at this dreadful tale, but more determined than ever to help the villager. She thought hard and then said, "I can offer you a solution if you will accept it."

"We will accept any suggestion for we are all so upset that we are unable to think clearly."

"Then listen," said Kunti firmly. "You have only one son who is still of tender age. I have five sturdy sons. Let one of them go with the rice and buffaloes to the demon."

The villager clamped his hands over his ears, shocked at the suggestion.

"Lady," he said, "we cannot even consider your offer. The idea of trying to save ourselves by sacrificing one of your sons is abhorrent."

Kunti pacified the agitated man and then took up the argument again.

"You do not know my sons," she explained with a smile of pride. "I have one of them particularly in mind for this task. I want him to go to the demon not because I love him less than you do your son, but because he is experienced in vanquishing demons. He is built like a giant and moves swiftly as the Wind God. So, let my son go to Vaka."

Kunti returned to her own room and told her sons about the demon Vaka. She added that she had promised

to send one of them to deal with the cannibal. Bhima grinned. "I am the obvious choice, Mother," he said. "Consider it as good as done."

The next day, Bhima got Vaka's repast ready and set off gaily for the forest where the demon lived. Vaka was watching from his house and he noted the cart-puller's height and girth, the rippling muscles and the huge torso. He nodded with satisfaction. This human being would be a satisfying mouthful! But the next moment he frowned. Where were his buffaloes?

But his puzzlement turned to astonishment and then to rage when he saw what Bhima was doing. He was sitting on the ground with a large plantain leaf before him and helping himself with a huge shovel to the food in the cart. As the demon watched, the rice, vegetables and other eatables began to disappear at an alarming rate into the bottomless well of Bhima's stomach.

With a deafening roar, Vaka advanced. He stopped a few yards from Bhima. Bhima languidly glanced towards the huge oak-like legs of Vaka and then turned back to gobble up another shovelful of rice. Vaka moved nearer.

"What kind of fool are you that you dare to invite Vaka's wrath?" he thundered. "Do you not know that you have been sent as my dinner? And where, may I ask, are my buffaloes?"

Bhima helped himself to more rice and another large mouthful of curry before he spoke. "No buffaloes," he said curtly.

"What do you mean, no buffaloes?" spluttered Vaka.

"Shortage of livestock in the village," explained Bhima



coolly. "We need our cows and buffaloes. The village children must have their milk."

Speechless with rage, Vaka rushed at him. Bhima did not move a muscle. The demon stood behind Bhima and tried to lift him but though he pulled and pushed with all his might, he could not budge the Pandava warrior. Then Vaka raised his huge arms and brought them down on the back of Bhima's neck.

"Oh, do go away," said Bhima, shaking off the blow which only seemed to ruffle his hair a little. "You are annoying me and ruining my enjoyment of this special meal."

Stunned, Vaka stood and watched Bhima finish all the food in the cart and then calmly wash his hands.

"Now," said Bhima, taking a fighting stance, "if you are ready, we can have our little joust."

Vaka tensed his muscles and leaped at Bhima. Bhima moved, swift as lightning, and using his arms and legs together, pushed the demon to the ground and sat on his stomach. Vaka rolled clear and uprooting a tree rushed at Bhima. Bhima, not to be outdone, pulled out another tree with his right hand and, holding it in front of him, checked the rush of the demon. Soon the two fighters were hurling trees at each other. Disturbed by the upheaval, birds flew

around chirping shrilly for a time and then perched at a safe distance to watch the fight. The earth tremors caused by the contest between these two mountainlike men could be felt for miles around.

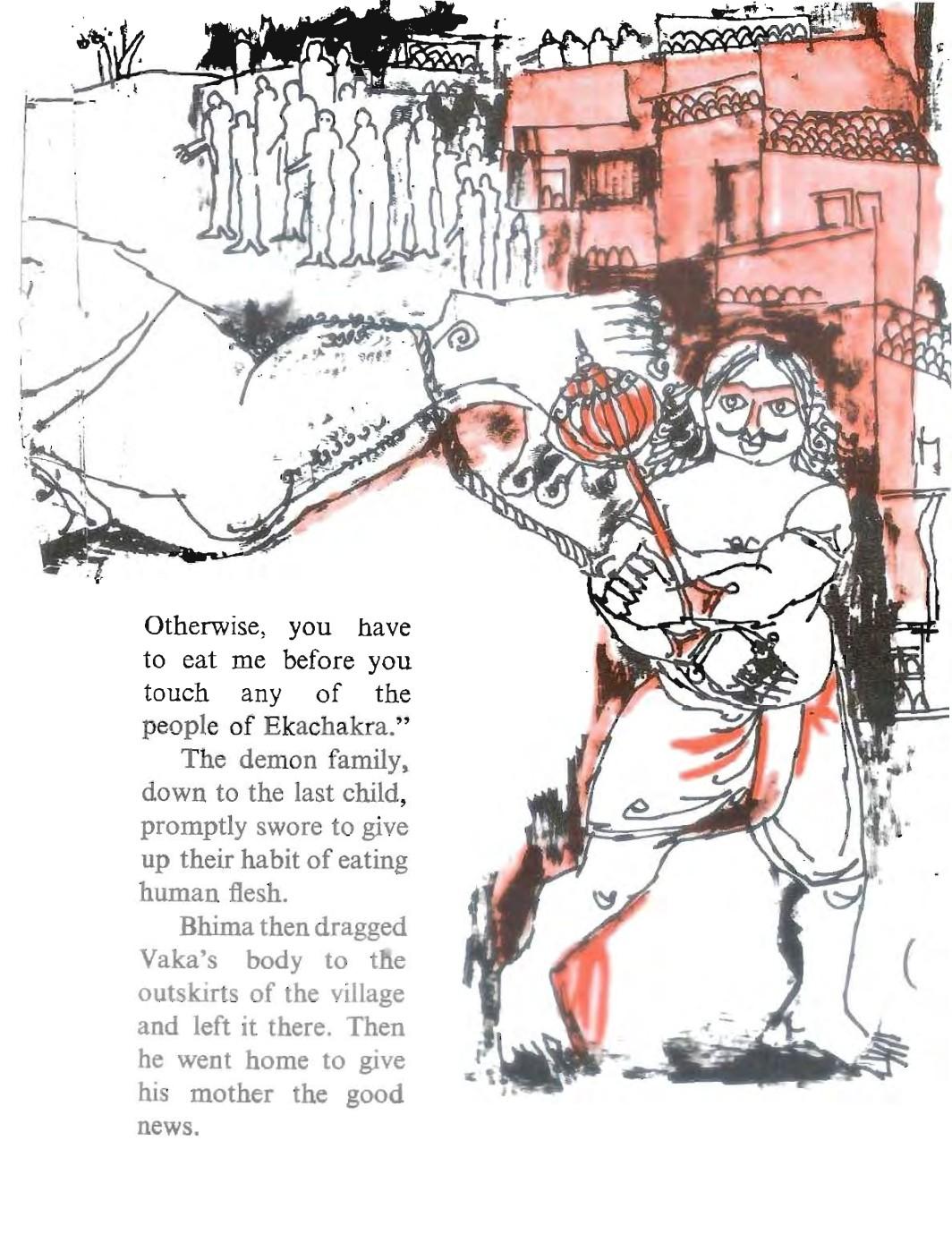




Soon Vaka began to pant with fatigue. All he now wanted was to escape from this monster who had obviously come to kill him. But Bhima would not let him go. Whenever the demon tried to run away, he dragged him back and gave him a few more blows. At last Bhima struck Vaka so hard that he fell down flat. Kneeling on Vaka's back, Bhima bent the demon's head and legs till his spine snapped. With a deafening roar which sent the lions and tigers in the forest trembling to their caves, Vaka died on the spot.

When Vaka's relatives heard his dying cry, they rushed to the forest clearing and threw themselves at Bhima's feet begging for mercy. Bhima's face was stern, but his words were fair.

"You can continue to live in this forest on one condition," he said. "You must stop being cannibals.



Otherwise, you have  
to eat me before you  
touch any of the  
people of Ekachakra."

The demon family,  
down to the last child,  
promptly swore to give  
up their habit of eating  
human flesh.

Bhima then dragged  
Vaka's body to the  
outskirts of the village  
and left it there. Then  
he went home to give  
his mother the good  
news.



## THE BURNING OF THE KHANDAVA FOREST

One day when the battle of Kurukshetra was over, and Yudhishtira had been installed as King of Hastinapura, Krishna and Arjuna were sitting on the banks of the Yamuna enjoying the cool evening breeze. Life had been peaceful since the battle ended—too peaceful for their liking. They enjoyed adventure and excitement.

As they sat gossiping about the new ministers and statesmen at the court, they saw a tall man, who looked noble but sick and troubled, coming towards them. He walked as if each step was a strain. He came near and said piteously: "Food, give me food. I am famished."

Krishna and Arjuna, speaking with one voice, said: "We shall immediately arrange for you to be fed to your heart's content. Sit down and rest while we order food." People were very hospitable in those days.

But the stranger shook his head and said: "I do not

want ordinary food. I want crunchy, mouth-filling food. Can't you recognise me? I am Agni."

Krishna and Arjuna looked closer and saw that it was indeed the Fire God who had changed so much that they had failed to recognise him. They saluted him respectfully and seating him comfortably enquired about his welfare.

Had he been ill recently? What special food would he like? Even if it was rare and difficult to obtain, it would be brought and cooked as he wanted.

"There is no need to make anything," said Agni weakly. "My special dinner has already been prepared."

"Where is it? What is it?"

"It is the Khandava forest."

"You mean it is *in* the Khandava forest."

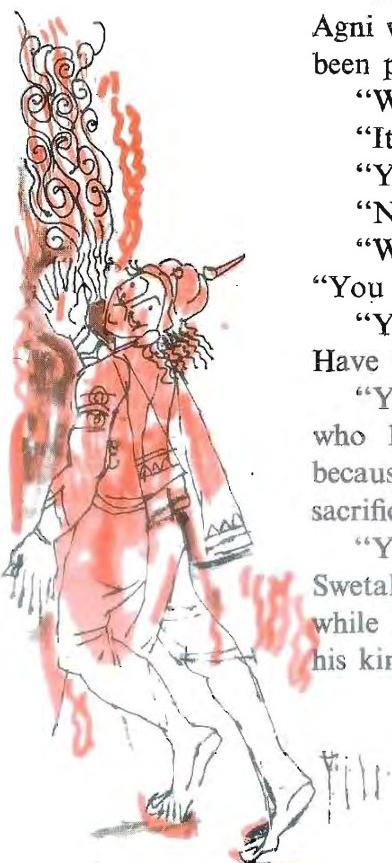
"No, it is the Khandava forest itself."

"What?" asked Krishna with astonishment.  
"You want to eat a forest?"

"Yes," replied Agni. "I shall tell you why.  
Have you heard of King Swetaki?"

"Yes," said Arjuna. "Isn't he the King  
who has acquired such fame and renown  
because of his religious ceremonies and  
sacrifices?"

"Yes," agreed Agni gloomily. "One day  
Swetaki undoubtedly will go to heaven. But  
while he is still on earth, not a Brahmin in  
his kingdom will speak to him."



"Why?" asked Arjuna.

"They have become almost blind in his service," explained Agni. "What else would you expect if you sat before a smoking fire and recited Vedic hymns day after day, month after month? I was not responsible for the smoke. After every kind of dry wood in the country had been exhausted, they tried to feed me with green branches. Hence the smoke. It got into the eyes and throats of those poor Brahmins. The result was that the King had to send for priests from a neighbouring kingdom to officiate at his last ceremony."

"Do you mean that these religious ceremonies have been going on for a long time?" asked Arjuna, avoiding Krishna's eye in case they should both burst out laughing.

"Years," said Agni wearily. "No sooner did King Swetaki end one ceremony than he began another. He performed the five great sacrifices which all Kshatriya kings are expected to perform. Then he undertook another ceremony to give gifts to a thousand Brahmins. This was followed by yet another to please the gods so that the women and children in his kingdom would be happy and healthy."

"That does seem excessive even for a virtuous king," said Krishna gravely.

"Look what it has done to me!" said Agni sighing. "See my condition! You could not even recognise me when I came. For years I have been only fed *ghee* which has been poured on me in barrelfuls during these endless ceremonies. Just think what it must be like to eat nothing but *ghee* for so many years! Look at my complexion. Where is the sheen, the glow, the radiance that was the

envy even of women? I am famished for healthy, nourishing food. I feel listless and weak."

"Is that why you want to eat the Khandava forest?"

"Yes, that is one reason. The Khandava forest has everything I crave: dry trees which will crackle in my mouth, green, juicy plants, shrubs and vines whose sap I can lick with one of my many tongues, animals whose fat will taste like nectar to me."

"You said this was one reason," Arjuna said hastily.  
"Is there another?"

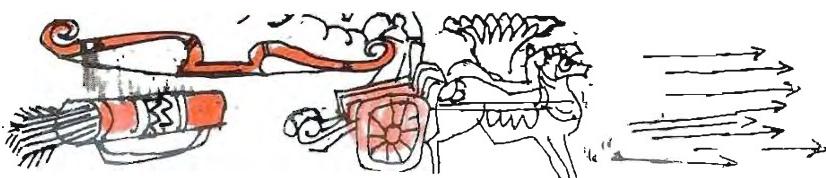
"Yes," replied Agni, turning away his thoughts with an effort from the idea of food. "The Khandava forest has become one of the outposts of the empire of Indra, the King of the gods of space. I have never understood why Indra, who wields so much power and has at his command innumerable gods, should suffer from a sense of insecurity. He is always on the lookout for possible rebels and usurpers, both on earth and in heaven. He sees enemies around every corner."

"So Indra has got friends and watchdogs in the Khandava forest?" asked Krishna.

"Yes, and guess who is their leader? Takshaka."

"What!" exclaimed Arjuna. "Does the King of serpents descend to the level of a spy and an informer?"

"He himself does not," said Agni. "I have no quarrel with him. We go our separate ways. But his army of snakes in the forest does not have as keen a sense of justice as he has. Moreover, there is a strange collection of fiends, demons, devils, monsters and unclean spirits. There are vampires, gnomes, dwarfs, giants and cannibals. There are



curious-looking birds, savage beasts and ferocious brutes. People are afraid to go out after sunset because wild animals carry away their young. And throughout the night, such weird noises are heard from the depths of the forest that even grown-up men and women lie awake trembling. Something has to be done. The forest has to go."

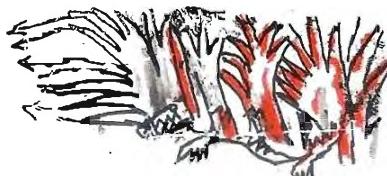
"Do you really think you can consume this huge forest?" Arjuna asked doubtfully.

"Yes," said Agni licking his lips, "but I need help. I have tried to do it alone seven times but never even got started. Indra himself protects the forest with the help of the gods of the heavens. In despair, I went to Brahma, and he said: 'Go and ask Krishna and Arjuna to assist you.' Can you help me?"

Krishna waited for Arjuna to make the decision. The Khandava forest was part of his kingdom.

"We shall help you," said Arjuna after some thought, "but we need weapons. For instance, I want a heavier bow than the one I have and a large number of arrows. I would also need a chariot to carry this load. And the chariot must be drawn by pure white horses which can run as fast as the wind on wheels





which, when they turn, will disperse the clouds for miles around. Krishna will want some weapons too. If you can supply us with these, we are ready to help you reduce the Khandava forest to a well-cooked meal."

"Krishna will only need the *chakra*," said Agni. "I shall give it to him myself. Arjuna, as for the weapons you want, I'll ask Varuna to supply them to you."

Krishna got the *chakra*, a wheel with a serrated edge and a hole in the centre in which his right index finger fitted. He could throw it in such a way that it would cut off his enemy's head smoothly and swiftly and return to him like a boomerang.

Arjuna got Varuna's marvellous bow along with a magic quiver of arrows. When one arrow was taken out, another at once appeared in its place. He was also given a chariot built by Viswakarman, the architect who had designed the universe. It had white steeds with golden harnesses which moved across the sky like a flash of lightning. In addition, Varuna gave Arjuna a huge mace which, when flourished, sounded like thunder.

Arjuna put on his coat of mail, girded his sword, drew on gloves of soft leather, strung his bow, examined the chariot for any possible defects and then turned to Agni.

"We are ready," he said. "Please go and surround the forest. Then Krishna and I will take up our positions. I promise you will get your Khandava meal."

As the God of Fire hissed his way round the Khandava forest, Krishna and Arjuna rose into space and stationed themselves above the dense green foliage.



Hundreds of living creatures, large and small, of all shapes, sizes and colours, had already smelt the fire and were looking for a means of escape. Some had huge heads and webbed feet, others were one-eyed and still others had scaly wings and long claws. Some of them panicked and ran straight into the fire. Burning like torches they rolled on the grass trying to put out the flames but tongues of fire spreading wider and wider in the forest caught them again and they died howling frightfully.



Large-winged strange birds rose like black clouds into the sky. Krishna and Arjuna's arrows dropped them into the flames below where, in the twinkling of an eye, they were reduced to steaming mounds of flesh. Deep in the forest many animals stood in terror watching with dilated eyes the flames creeping greedily closer and closer. Snakes tried to wriggle through the grass and escape but Agni, ever watchful, burnt the grass and they perished.

The streams and ponds within the forest began to boil because of the intense heat. Fish died in shoals and floated on the water.

The smell of burning flesh pervaded the forest. The people in the surrounding villages left their homes and fled from the sight, sound and smell of burning.

The gods of space watched in awe for a while and then went in a body to their King, Indra. Indra was furious.

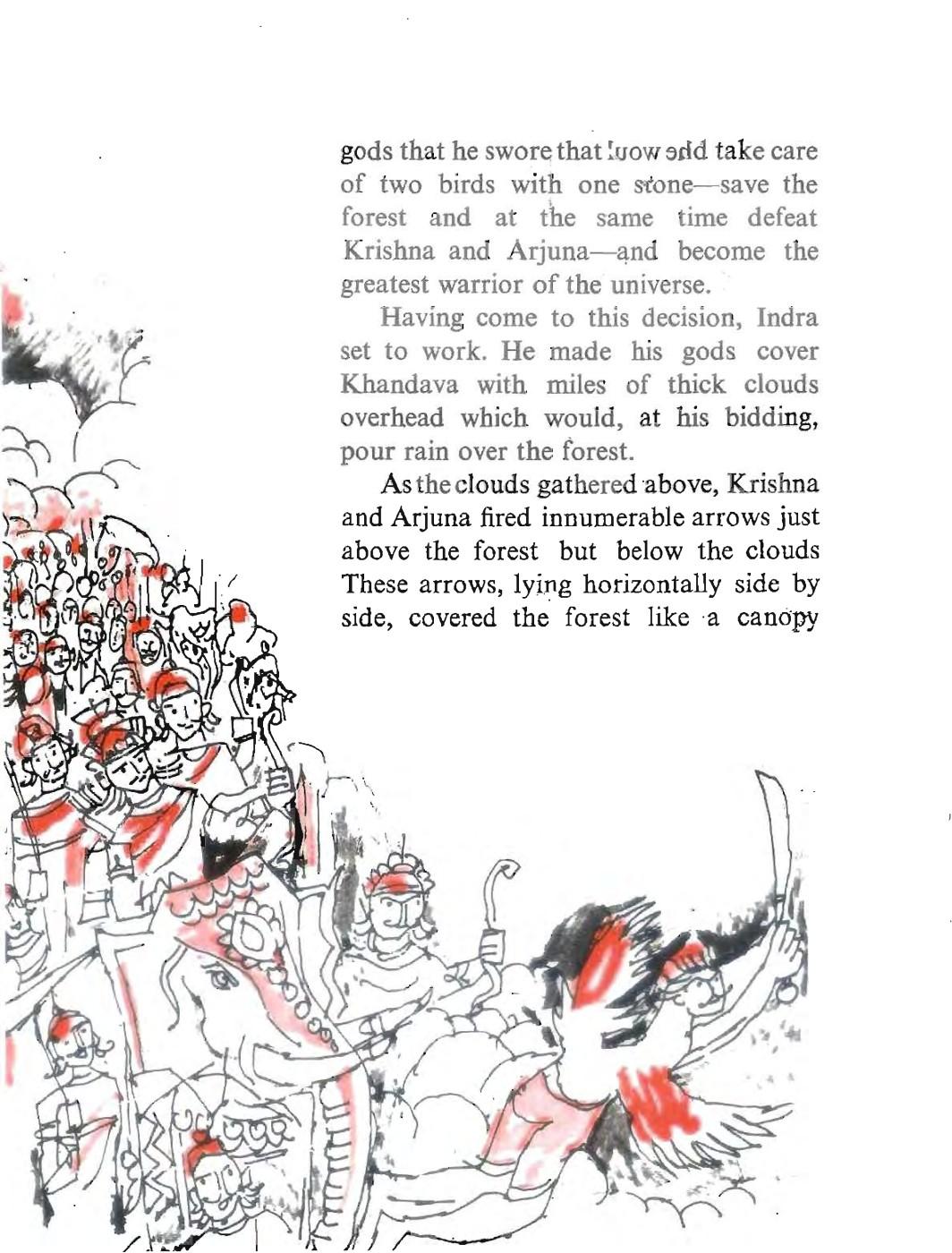
"What!" he roared. "Has that stupid, *ghee*-eating Agni dared to attack my stronghold in Khandava? Takshaka and I will teach him a lesson which he will never forget."

"If you remember, Sire," said one of the gods, "Takshaka is not in Khandava. He has not yet returned from Kurukshetra. But even if he were there, it would be difficult to protect Khandava."

"Why would it be difficult?"

"Because Agni is not alone. Krishna and Arjuna are helping him. At this moment their chariot is standing above the burning forest."

This made Indra pause for a moment. Krishna and Arjuna were famous warriors, and were known to be invincible. But such was the arrogance of the King of the



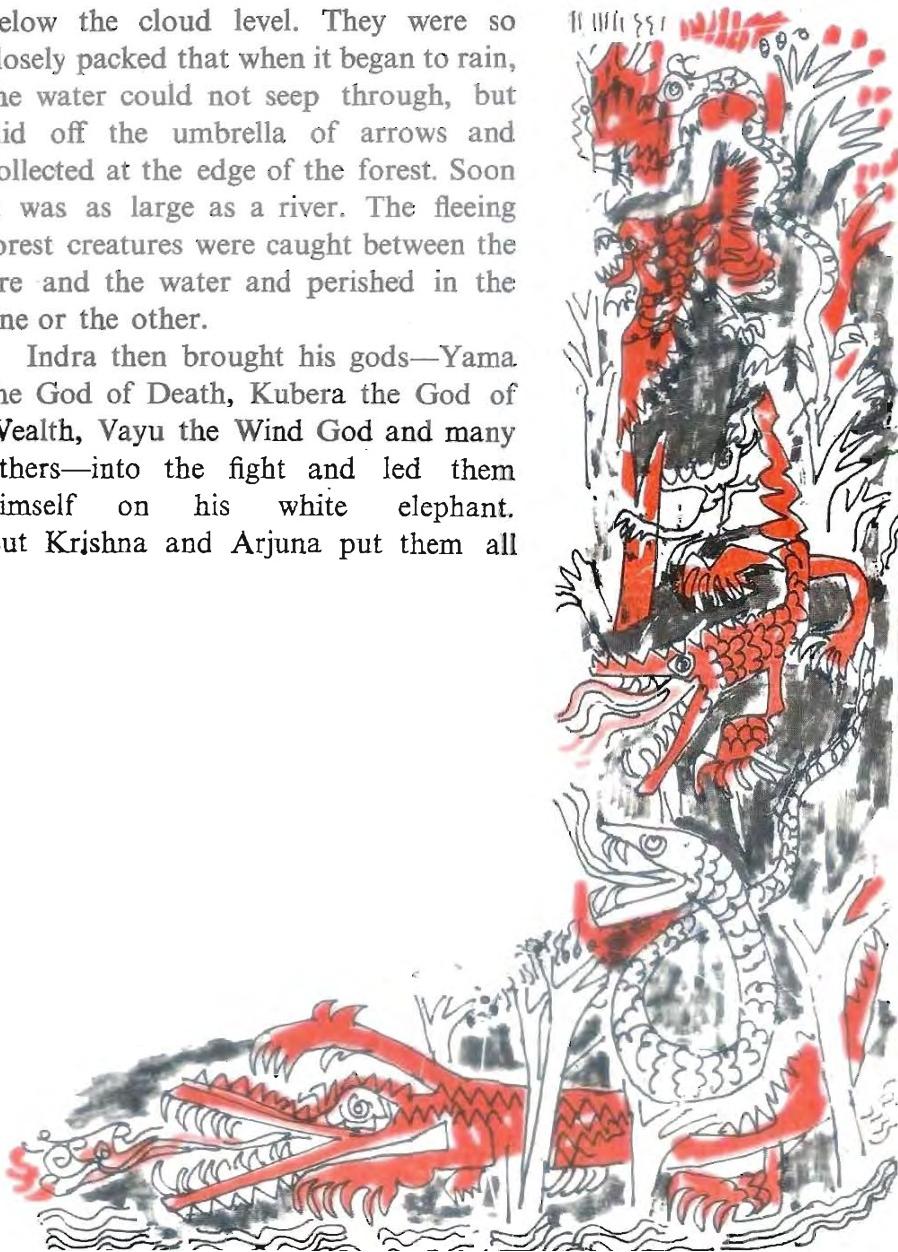
gods that he swore that I would take care of two birds with one stone—save the forest and at the same time defeat Krishna and Arjuna—and become the greatest warrior of the universe.

Having come to this decision, Indra set to work. He made his gods cover Khandava with miles of thick clouds overhead which would, at his bidding, pour rain over the forest.

As the clouds gathered above, Krishna and Arjuna fired innumerable arrows just above the forest but below the clouds. These arrows, lying horizontally side by side, covered the forest like a canopy.

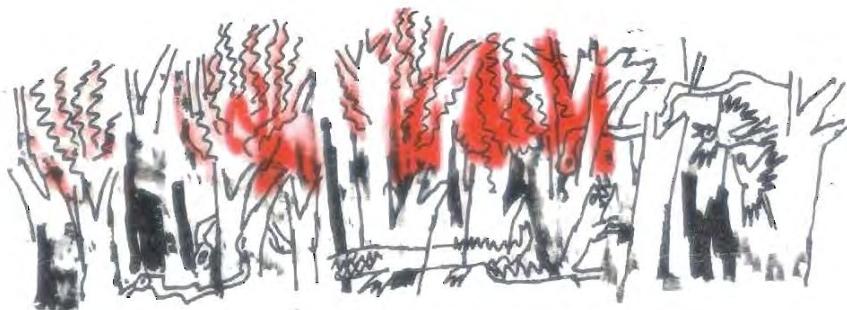
below the cloud level. They were so closely packed that when it began to rain, the water could not seep through, but slid off the umbrella of arrows and collected at the edge of the forest. Soon it was as large as a river. The fleeing forest creatures were caught between the fire and the water and perished in the one or the other.

Indra then brought his gods—Yama the God of Death, Kubera the God of Wealth, Vayu the Wind God and many others—into the fight and led them himself on his white elephant. But Krishna and Arjuna put them all



to flight. Even Indra was routed. But he did not leave the field of battle and save himself. He had to keep his promise at any cost. He had to save Takshaka's wife and son. It was a pledge he had made to Takshaka when he had sought the serpent-King's help in managing the strange birds, beasts and reptiles with which he had filled the Khandava forest.

When Takshaka's wife saw Indra's magnificent mount over the forest, she came whizzing through the flames, her lovely skin singed by the heat. Arjuna saw the splendid female snake rise into the sky, and got ready to shoot her down. But Krishna stopped him. "O wife of Takshaka," he called out, "where is your son? I cannot see him. Are you leaving him in the forest to perish while you escape?"





"My son is in my belly," replied Takshaka's wife. "I swallowed him to protect him from the flames. You will have to kill me before you can get at him."

On hearing this, Arjuna dropped his bow.



The Khandava forest burned for fifteen days. Agni, consuming large quantities of flesh, blood and fat with his many flaming tongues, was at last satisfied. And when exhausted and sated, he stopped, the once large, thickly-populated forest stretching for miles in all directions was but an unending desert of grey and black ashes.





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